

VZCZCXYZ0001
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHAM #2492/01 3201620
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 161620Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY AMMAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6276
INFO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 6312
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 3118
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 4183
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS 4271
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 2231
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 1927
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 1060
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH 0923
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM 5698
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L AMMAN 002492

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ELA, EEB, INR/B
TUNIS FOR FSI STUDENT WONG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/16/2019

TAGS: ECON PGOV SOCI KDEM PINR JO

SUBJECT: JORDAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE ELECTIONS BRING VICTORIES FOR ACTIVISTS IN AMMAN; FIRST WOMAN ELECTED

REF: A. AMMAN 2141
1B. AMMAN 1804
1C. 08 AMMAN 1834

Classified By: DCM Lawrence C. Mandel for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) Summary: Jordan held its first elections for chambers of commerce since 1998 in early October, choosing board members for 17 commerce organizations: 16 local chambers and the nationwide Jordan Chamber of Commerce (JCC). The results swept activist members into the Amman Chamber of Commerce (ACC), Jordan's largest and most economically significant chamber. The elections also saw Reem Badran elected as the first woman ever to serve in any chamber of commerce in Jordan, a significant milestone for women in Jordan's democratic process. She earned leadership positions as well, having been elected the Second Vice Chair in both the ACC and JCC. End summary.

A Primer on the Chambers

12. (U) Jordan held its first chamber of commerce elections since 1998 in early October. More than a decade has passed since the previous elections because of the government's decision to pass a new Chambers of Commerce Law in 2003, and the subsequent need to align the various chamber by-laws and procedures with the new law. Jordan has 17 chambers of commerce in total, including 16 at the local level and one nationwide chamber. The reasons for such a large number of organizations include the practical and political. The need to let businesses register in their localities as opposed to having to come to Amman is one practical aspect of having local chambers. Politically, having many chambers ensures that Amman can not dominate the other chambers, and allows for a certain degree of patronage, for local businessmen to capitalize on the prestige associated with being a board member representing their local communities within the country. The nationwide Jordan Chamber of Commerce is comprised of 30 members: the 15 board presidents of each local chamber excluding Amman, five representatives from the board of directors of the Amman Chamber of Commerce, and one representative from each of ten business sectors. The sectors represented in the JCC are the automobile, clothing and jewelry, construction, electronics, finance and banking, foodstuffs, furniture, health and pharmaceuticals,

telecommunications, and services and consultancy sectors.
(Note: Jordan has 12 governorates but 16 chambers of commerce, with the smaller towns of Southern Mazar, Ramtha, Ruseifa, and South Shouna having their own chambers, distinct from those of the governorates in which those towns are located. End note.)

Activists Elected to Amman Chamber

¶3. (C) The key battleground in the elections was over the ACC, the strongest chamber, which, consistent with the country's demography, includes about three-quarters or 15,000 eligible member voters out of the total of about 20,000 voters in all of Jordan. (Note: While there are 45,000 members of the various chambers of commerce throughout Jordan, about 20,000 members have voting rights, depending on the value of their business investments. End Note.) Amman saw 28 candidates grouped into three major blocks vie for the nine seats in the ACC Board of Directors. The Labor bloc won five of the nine seats in the ACC Board, while the two other blocs--Change and Development, and Future--each won two seats. Reem Badran, CEO of Kuwaiti Jordanian Holding Co., who earned a master's degree from the Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies in Washington, won a seat as an ACC Board member from the Labor bloc and was subsequently elected to both ACC and JCC leadership positions. She described to EconOffs what she termed three trends among candidates for the chamber: the activist, neutral, and traditionalist trends.

¶4. (C) Badran described her Labor bloc as activist and supportive of a more visible policy role for the ACC. She asserted that the Labor bloc advocated a more active posture, with younger members willing to engage the government on issues important to the business community. Riad Saifi, who led the Labor bloc and was elected President of the ACC Board, told EconOffs that he had three main goals going into the election for his bloc: to include young professionals, a woman, and a Christian on the ticket. He accomplished all three of these. Illustrating Saifi's efforts, Badran shared with EconOffs that Saifi, who has close ties to the business elite in upscale West Amman as well as to the lower-rung businessmen of downtown Amman, personally accompanied her to visit the conservative business district of downtown Amman to help shore up support for her, and for his bloc. In contrast, she defined the traditionalists (and to a lesser extent the neutral trend candidates) in the election as those businessmen seeking to continue the generally apathetic policy posture of the ACC over the last decade.

¶5. (C) Badran's election represents an important milestone for women in Jordan. While women are active in business, Badran, in addition to being the first woman elected to the ACC and JCC Boards as well as to leadership roles in the two boards, is also the first woman to ever become a Board member of any of Jordan's 17 chambers of commerce. Her victory is further significant also because with 1,943 votes, she received more votes than any other candidate for any of the chambers throughout Jordan. For example, her vote total far surpassed the less than 300 votes won by the Board President of the Aqaba Chamber of Commerce, Nael Karabiti, who was also elected JCC Board President.

Priorities for the Amman Chamber

¶6. (C) Saifi and Badran separately described to EconOffs their priorities for the ACC during meetings in late October and early November. Badran, focused on policy issues, outlined her and the Chamber's opposition to the substance of the recently-withdrawn tax law and her view that the government's proposed food company was a bad idea (refs A and B). She also stated her firm opposition to the practice of government-imposed provisional laws (ref C). Saifi agreed on the need for the government to start over on a new tax law as the ACC membership opposed the government's version. He also

disagreed with the government's imposition of provisional elements of the draft social security law and he stressed the need for a re-working of the Chambers of Commerce Law, lamenting the fact that the Amman Chamber was in a weaker position in the JCC because of the 2003 law that defined the current system. Saifi was concerned that the ACC's influence had been diminished and Amman could now be outvoted by the 15 other chambers, plus one (any one of the remaining 15 members), in the 30-member JCC Board even though the ACC represents three-quarters of all members of Jordan's various chambers of commerce together, is the strongest financially, accounts for 82% of Jordan's economy, and covers 75% of the JCC's budget. Saifi was also keen on improving the ACC's professionalism and enhancing its influence and profile in Jordan and abroad. Both Saifi and Badran both were optimistic that they would be able to work with the government on their priorities for Amman's business community.

¶7. (C) Comment: The election of Jordan's first woman member of a chamber of commerce is a significant milestone for women in Jordan's democratic process. Badran's generally positive assessment of the process to win election could portend her future electoral participation, though she declined to indicate to EconOffs whether she intends to run for parliament in 2011. What remains uncertain is whether Badran's success signals a significant shift in the political viability of women candidates among Jordanian voters, or whether her name recognition, family reputation (her father and uncle both served as Prime Minister), and her bloc were the keys to her victory. End comment.

Visit Amman's Classified Website at:
http://diplopedia.state.sgov.gov/index.php?title=Embassy_Amman

Beecroft